**Gender Stereotypes**

**Overview**To make students aware of the dangers of gender stereotyping and the media's role in perpetuating gender stereotypes.

**Learning Outcomes**  
  
Students will demonstrate:

* an understanding of the potentially damaging effects of living up to stereotypes, and how they can lead to abuse and violence against ourselves and others.
* an understanding of the media's role in perpetuating these stereotypes.
* an understanding that "going along with the crowd" can involve sacrificing one's own principles, as well as infringing on the rights of others.

**Preparation and Materials**

* for Day 1, a flip-chart and markers

**The Lesson: Day 1  
  
Guided Discussion**  
Write **Act Like a Man** at the top of the flip chart paper and record student responses. (Note: Begin by directing the question to the boys. The girls can then be encouraged to respond. Attempt to record students' own choice of words. If their responses are too wordy, ask them to simplify for display purposes. If the offers are slow to come, ask them to discuss the topic in pairs, then share with the class, or make specific prompts by asking what does it mean to "Act Like a Man" in sports, business, on a date, etc.)  
  
Ask students:

* What does it mean to act like a man? What words or expectations come to mind? (e.g., men don't cry, men are tough, men are strong)
* Draw a box around the entire list.

We're going to call this the ***Act Like a Man*** box. Inside the box is a list of attitudes and behaviors that boys are pressured to adopt in the process of becoming men in our society. Men and boys are not born this way; these roles are learned.  
  
Next, write **Be Ladylike** at the top of another sheet of flip chart paper and record student responses. (As with the boys, begin by directing questions to the girls, then encourage boys to respond.) Ask your students:

What does it mean to be ladylike? What words or expectations do you think of? (e.g., girls are polite, girls are neat, girls are passive)

Draw a box around this list.

This is the ***Be Ladylike*** box. It's full of stereotypes, just like the Act Like a Man box. Its walls of conformity are just as restrictive. Women also learn to conform to very specific role expectations as they grow up being female in our society.

**Learning Gender Roles**  
Ask students:

* Where do we learn these gender roles? (Discussion prompts: What people teach us these stereotypes? People in entertainment? Sports? Media? When the students respond "TV" or "movies, " ask for specific examples to list.)
* Where do women learn these messages? (Discussion prompts: You may put "moms" on the paper and ask for discussion. What other people influence our learning of gender roles? Where else in society do we find these messages? Ask for specific examples if the comments are too general.)
* Write these responses down the left side, outside the box. You may draw arrows to illustrate how these influences reinforce the wall of the stereotype box.

**How Stereotypes Are Reinforced**

Ask students:

* What names or put-downs are directed at boys when they don't fit the box?
* What names are women called if they step out of the stereotype box?  
    
  ***Note:*** Allow students to be blunt with their slang in this educational context.
* Write the names along the bottom of the appropriate box. You may draw arrows to illustrate how they reinforce the wall of the stereotype box.

Ask students:

* How do these labels and names reinforce the stereotype box?
* How does it feel when we are called these names?
* What do you think the person who is using these put-downs is feeling?

(These names are used in order to hurt people emotionally, and we react by retreating to the "safety" of the stereotype box.)

Evaluating the Gender Stereotypes  
  
Ask students:

* How many boys in the class have never cried, hands up? (Note: Choose "don't cry" from their list. If it was not offered during the brainstorming, select another reference.)
* Does this mean that those of you who didn't put up your hands are wimps, nerds, etc.?
* What about the girls; how many want to be passive, etc.?

We're all real people and we can experience the full range of emotions, including happiness and sadness, love and anger. The bottom line is that stereotypes are destructive because they limit our potential! Yet how many guys do we know who try hard to act like the stereotype, without even a second thought? What damage do we do to ourselves and others? Boys are not born to be violent, or to have unhealthy attitudes towards girls. We learn these attitudes and behaviors through the stereotypes of what society thinks it means to "Act Like a Man," and we can free ourselves from the restrictions of these boxes once we see them as unrealistic ideals. Then we can start the process of change.  
  
This is not to say that it's wrong for guys to like sports or fix cars or for girls to enjoy cooking (cite other examples from student generated list). (Note: It is important to make this point in order to be sensitive to boys or girls who may feel defensive.) The problem is that we are told that we must perform these roles in order to fit in. It is important for all of us to make our own decisions about what we do.  
  
A stereotype rigidly confirms the belief that if you are a girl or a boy, or a woman or a man, you must perform these specific roles, and do them well. This belief takes away our personal choices in determining our own interests and skills. It also discourages men from participating in "women's work" (such as flower arranging and child care) and it restricts women from choosing roles that are traditionally "male" (such as engineering and science).   
  
Ask students:

* What are some situations where you may be pressured to "Act Like A Man" or "Be a Lady?" (e.g., for boys, friends may tell you to try a cigarette or participate in a risky activity, to prove that you're 'tough', or for girls, you might be prevented from playing a certain sport or you might let someone bully you into doing something that you don't want to do, because it isn't "ladylike" to argue or be assertive.)
* How might these stereotypes lead to violence? (e.g., boys might be expected to 'fight it out,' rather than 'talk it out,' and girls might be expected to put up with bullying, rather than be assertive.)

**Activity**  
**Journal Entry**Have you ever experienced a situation where you were expected to act a certain way because you were a girl or a boy, even though it may not have been the way you felt like acting?